

Book Review

J.M.Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 125 pp., Profile Books, London, 2000.

A female novelist is invited to give a lecture in a US university and she uses the occasion to attack philosophers views on animals and the supremacy of reason: judging animals by how well they match our criteria of rationality or linguistic competence. This is the subject of the first half of the book entitled 'The Philosophers and the Animals'. In particular there is a fine discussion of the limited nature of Nagel's answer to the question, 'what is it like to be a bat?'. There are some philosophers however who accept her criticisms and it is a pity that they are ignored. See for instance, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* by Val Plumwood,¹ *Beyond Boundaries: Humans and Animals*, by Barbara Noske² and *Beyond Animal Rights: A feminist caring ethic for the treatment of animals* edited by Josephine Donovan and Carol Adams.³

The lecture also contains a discussion of the evils of confinement of animals and its devastating effects in zoos⁴, laboratories and institutions and the moral wrong in the 'places of slaughter' which surround us. There is a plea to use sympathetic imagination to think our way into the existence of an animal, just like we may do with a character in a novel.

The dinner afterwards is framed by a crisp, ironic discussion of vegetarianism with reflections on what makes animals different from humans. One dinner guest suggests that animals have no

¹ (Routledge, London, 1993).

² (Black Rose Books, Montreal, 1997).

³ (Continuum, New York, 1996).

⁴ Janet Frame evokes this well in the novel, *Daughter Buffalo* (Flamingo, London, 1993), p.112: 'We walked through the cat house, stopping at each cage to admire the grace and courage evident in spite of the habitual attitude of imprisonment that replaced brightness in the eyes with bewilderment and a perpetual leaking from the tufts that looked very much like real tears for real reasons, and the sleek coat with dull dry tufts of fur'.

shame. They don't hide their excretions and they perform sex in the open. Another announces that animals are creatures we don't have sex with.

The second half of *The Lives of Animals*, 'The Poets and the Animals', centres on a seminar to the English faculty. Ted Hughes is praised for writing poems which 'ask us to imagine our way into [the jaguar's] way of moving, to inhabit that body'(p.85) in contrast to inhabiting another mind. Such poetry is a 'record of an engagement' with an animal (p.86).

In the ensuing discussion the woman misses some obvious responses eg when accused of trying to impose a western ethic, she fails to point out that concern for animals and vegetarianism has been an important part of major eastern religions such as Buddhism.

This is a challenging book, exposing the immorality of common attitudes towards animals held by 'kind' people. It aptly points out the weakness of much philosophy. The way forward, the poet's way is explored with tantalizing brevity and some might find Hughes an odd choice. I do.

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